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Activists Urge Focus On EPA Radiation Concern In Novel Corps Mine Review

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Environmentalists are calling on the Army Corps of Engineers to address EPA concerns of widespread radiation exposure in communities built on former phosphate mines in Florida among the impacts the Corps will consider in a novel "area wide" environmental impact statement (EIS) it is preparing as it weighs whether to permit new mines.

The Corps agreed to an EPA request to draft the novel EIS in June, and is hosting the first in a series of meetings to take public comment on how the document should be prepared Oct. 6-7.

The first meeting will take place in Lakeland, FL, the center of an area where, according to documents *Inside EPA* obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the agency fears tens of thousands of people are being exposed to dangerous levels of radiation in homes built on former phosphate mines.

Environmentalists during the public meeting will urge the Army Corps to consider admissions in the FOIA documents that the enormous cost of cleaning up the former mines in the Lakeland area -- as much as \$11 billion by some estimates -- has hampered EPA's ability to address the residential radiation issue, a Florida activist says. The Corps should consider in its EIS whether financial resources will be available to do the type of cleanup necessary to ensure that a similar situation does not occur at new mines in other parts of the state, the activist argues.

Under Superfund law, EPA has the authority to use its own funds to clean up a site and then sue the parties responsible for the contamination to recoup its costs. This authority often gives industry an incentive to clean up contamination on its own in an effort to limit costs.

But in the case of the former phosphate mining sites, EPA has no such leverage, in part because of the exorbitant cost to clean up the complex sites, and in part because of cuts to the agency's Superfund budget in recent years, the FOIA documents say.

The admission could boost Rep. Earl Blumenauer's (D-OR) bid to reinstate the expired Superfund taxes on industry, a staffer for the lawmaker said recently ([see related story](#)).

Industry and Florida state officials are disputing the need for the cleanup, however, in what activists say is a precedent-setting fight over radiation cleanup standards.

Environmentalists also say the Corps' "area-wide" EIS, which will cover the entirety of central Florida's Bone Valley, could provide a new model for how the impacts of phosphate mining should be assessed in other states, such as North Carolina. In addition to the EPA residential radiation concerns outlined in the FOIA documents, environmentalists have a host of water quality concerns related to phosphate mining and argue the practice permanently destroys vast amounts of valuable wetlands.

Environmentalists recently cited the Corps plans to prepare the EIS in a successful bid to urge a federal court to temporarily block new mining at one site, but industry is appealing that ruling to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit.

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